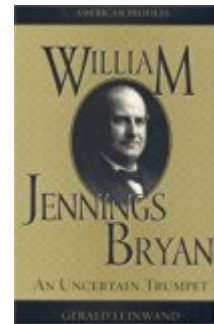


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Gerald Leinwand. *William Jennings Bryan: An Uncertain Trumpet*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. xx + 208 pp. \$33.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-5158-9.

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Bryan in Brief

There seems to be a small boomlet in recent studies of William Jennings Bryan. Michael Kazin tackled Bryan's life in 2006 with *A Godly Hero* and now Gerald Leinwand, president emeritus of Western Oregon University, has written a short synthesis of The Great Commoner in *William Jennings Bryan: An Uncertain Trumpet*. Not entirely a sympathetic portrait, Leinwand refers to Bryan as "prominent" but "unlucky" as a player in American politics for four decades (p. xix). Even after his death, Leinwand notes, Bryan was unlucky in popular memory. Theories about Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) as an allegory for the 1896 election cast Bryan as the Cowardly Lion. In *Inherit the Wind* (1955) Bryan appears as the blowhard Matthew Harrison Brady. Historians likewise have sometimes been uncertain how to handle Bryan. Was he a buffoon perhaps, or a representative of the Christian Progressive movement? While not calling Bryan a buffoon, Leinwand does note that Bryan was "a man who was wrong so many times, on so many issues" (p. xix).

Leinwand covers Bryan's life in chronological order in roughly 160 pages. Based mostly on secondary sources, along with some of Bryan's published works such as his autobiography (1925), completed by his wife, Mary, and his book on the 1896 campaign, *The First Battle* (1897), Leinwand covers ground familiar to anyone who has read existing biographies of Bryan. The author discusses Bryan's childhood in Illinois, his discovery the power of speaking at Salem College, his short career as a lawyer and his entrance into Democratic politics in Nebraska. Bryan began his political career in 1891 repre-

senting a district which included Omaha and Lincoln, but he was and remained, according to Leinwand, "a man of the frontier and [he] would never accept the fact that the frontier was vanishing." This is a critical point for Leinwand. Bryan, in his view, was "guided in his political life by an echo of the American past, while failing to hear the voice of America's future" (p. 25).

Leinwand emphasizes Bryan's speaking skills, referring to him as "a man to whom oratory was as natural as breathing" (p. 32). This is not new but it provides a unifying thread through the author's description of Bryan's career. It also sets the stage for one of the most dramatic moments in Bryan's long career, the "Cross of Gold" speech at the 1896 Democratic Convention. As Leinwand notes, Bryan had been preparing this speech for a long time, and had used much of it previously. Bryan had been consciously making himself into the main national spokesman for bimetallism as well as a thorn in President Grover Cleveland's side as the incumbent president tried to preserve Democratic backing for the gold standard. Cleveland and the gold Democrats lost that battle at the 1896 Chicago convention and Bryan became the leader of the Democratic Party. Leinwand includes a long excerpt from the "Cross of Gold" speech, which will be familiar to specialists in the period, but may be new to undergraduates reading the book. This is not a complaint. I use the speech in survey classes to good effect. It is undoubtedly a dramatic, if empty, speech and it illustrates Leinwand's point that Bryan was more interested in the effects of oratory than in its content. As he notes, "[Bryan] spoke for the Democratic platform with

a magnificent voice and earnestness of manner. He was not plagued by doubt, nor, for that matter, bothered too much by the facts” (p. 54).

Leinwand’s description of Bryan during the 1896 and 1900 campaigns covers familiar ground. Outspent by a large margin by the Republicans, Bryan relied on his speaking skills in a series of speeches, sometimes as many as thirty a day, to carry his message to the voters. It was a remarkable effort on his part, although futile in the end, as McKinley won both elections handily. Leinwand criticizes Bryan for supporting the 1898 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Spanish-American War and gave the Philippines to the United States, writing “few episodes in Bryan’s political career reflect more negatively on his naiveté and muddled thinking.” In doing so Bryan, according to Leinwand, “missed an opportunity to lead and unite the anti-imperialistic forces of both parties” (p. 74). Perhaps, I cannot argue with Leinwand that Bryan’s expectation that the United States would be a more humane master of the Philippines than Spain was “naïve.” The brutal war that followed from 1898-1902 makes that point clear. Nevertheless, I do question how effective Bryan would have been uniting anti-imperialists of both parties. Republican anti-imperialists were centered in New England, where Bryan’s support was weak, and I found it doubtful that the “Boy Orator of the Platte” would have found much support among the northeastern Republicans over anti-imperialism. I agree with Leinwand, however, that by trying to remove imperialism from the political stage before the 1900 election, Bryan made a tactical political error.

Bryan, of course, remained a leader within the Democratic Party even after losing in 1900, and running and losing again in 1908. By 1912 he was eclipsed as party leader by other, newer leaders, including Woodrow Wilson. Leinwand discusses Bryan’s role in the 1912 Baltimore Democratic convention. He erroneously assigns Bryan credit for “giving [Wilson] the votes needed to win the convention” (p. 98). Bryan’s maneuvering in Baltimore did play an important role in throwing the nomination from Champ Clark to Wilson, but his support was not, in itself, sufficient for Wilson to win. Wilson’s convention managers, including William McAdoo, probably deserve the credit instead for making well-timed political deals with the party bosses in Illinois and Indiana. Leinwand also claims that once elected, Wilson made Bryan secretary of state “as a reward for his service in making Wilson’s election possible” (p. 99). I suspect it was due instead to Bryan claiming the loyalty of a great many Democrats, including members of Congress, whom Wil-

son needed to pass his domestic agenda. As Peter Finely Dunne’s character, Mr. Dooley, noted (as quoted by Leinwand) “Wilson preferred to have Mr. Bryan ‘in his bosom than on his back’ ” (p. 100).

Leinwand presents a good description of Bryan’s short tenure as secretary of state (1913-15), discussing his “Cooling Off” treaties, his continued paid appearances at Chautauqua and his serving grape juice at diplomatic functions. In his discussion of the Chautauqua issue Leinwand notes that Bryan felt he could not live on his \$1000 dollar a month salary, but neglects to mention that Bryan claimed that the extra income was necessary in order to entertain properly as secretary of state. Bryan made a decent living before joining Wilson’s cabinet, so he may have exaggerated his need for money, but Leinwand should have explained Bryan’s rationale.[1] Moreover, Leinwand barely touches on Bryan’s importance in helping Wilson push his reform agenda through Congress, spending but two short paragraphs on Bryan and domestic issues. The author spends almost as much space on Bryan’s refusal to serve alcohol at official dinners as he does on his role supporting the success of the “New Freedom.”

Leinwand’s discussion of Bryan’s resignation during the *Lusitania* affair is fair to Bryan, but he repeats the long-discredited notion that illegal arms stored onboard the *Lusitania* caused it to sink (p. 109). There were contraband arms shipments on board, but they were not of the type to have triggered the second explosion which caused the liner to sink so quickly. The author also notes that Wilson “betrayed his neutrality by declaring ‘There is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight.’ ” I am uncertain how this statement shows that Wilson, in Leinwand’s words, “wavered in his neutrality while Bryan ‘held fast’ ” (p. 109). In any event, students interested in the *Lusitania* should be steered toward Diane Preston’s *Lusitania: An Epic Tragedy* (2003).

Leinwand’s discussion of Bryan and the Prohibition movement is also less than satisfactory. His main sources, judging from the footnotes, are older books on Bryan and Herbert Asbury’s *The Great Illusion: An Informal History of Prohibition*, published in 1950. Leinwand’s discussion of the anti-alcohol movement reflects his neglect of newer scholarship. He claims that the District of Columbia went “dry” by 1910 (it did so in 1917), and that the county option replaced the town option in banning liquor because it meant that those who still drank had to travel further for their alcohol. County option more likely became a favored tactic largely because Pro-

hibition organizations relied on rural voters to counter the presumably “wet” urban voters who represented the “sinful” city. Finally, Leinwand portrays the Prohibitionists as modern-day Puritans, “extremists” that “could not sleep soundly knowing that someone, somewhere, was having a good time” (p. 122). In short, Leinwand’s description of the Prohibition movement ignores decades of scholarship on a complicated reform movement.

The discussion of race and Bryan in *Uncertain Trumpet* is stronger than the author’s treatment of prohibition. Leinwand shows Bryan as a man of his time, sharing many of the popular prejudices of white America against African Americans, Asians, and other people of color. He also, fairly I think, shows Bryan the politician trying to finesse a difficult political issue, opposing religious bigotry enough to keep Jewish and Catholic urban voters from abandoning the Democratic party, but not going so far as to alienate Ku Klux Klan supporters in those areas where the Klan was strongest. Bryan was also as Leinwand notes, “blind” to the problem of lynching. Like many other progressives, Bryan laid the blame on the victims, noting that their “hideous offenses” sometimes provoked lynchings (quoted, p. 136). And, although Bryan was not a member of the Klan, they burned a cross in his honor when Bryan arrived in Dayton, Tennessee for the Scopes trial.

It was in Dayton that Bryan “took the stage one last time,” and, as Leinwand notes, “it was one time too many.” Bryan’s oratorical skills had diminished and his reputation “as a political and spiritual leader died in Dayton” (p. 155). Bryan, in Leinwand’s judgment, disappointed many of his fundamentalist followers by declaring that the seven “days” in Genesis need not have been literal twenty-four-hour days. At the same time, Bryan revealed to the world just how much he had changed in the decades since his first presidential run, in 1896. He had become a grumpy old man and the one time seemingly radical reformer was now a reactionary. Leinwand’s description of the Scopes trial is largely taken from Stephen Jay Gould’s 1996 writings on the subject and with the chapter’s title, *The War on Science*, Gould’s influence shows. The account of Bryan in Dayton, however, is not unfair or unduly harsh. At first I was surprised that Leinwand used Gould, a biologist rather than a historian. However, Gould was well informed on the details of the Scopes trial and was deeply involved with more recent incarnations of the fight over evolution and so provides some interesting perspective.

Leinwand concludes with an epilogue on Bryan as an allegory in the *Wizard of Oz* and his portrayal in *Inherit*

the Wind. According to the *Oz* theory, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is based on the 1896 election. The characters in the story represent some aspect of that pivotal contest: the Tinman represents factory workers, Bryan is the Cowardly Lion, the yellow brick road represents the gold standard, and so on. Leinwand claims that there is a “general consensus” that L. Frank Baum did not write *Oz* “solely to pleasure children of today” (p. 169). Perhaps, but there is also now a consensus that Baum did not write *Oz* as an allegory for the 1896 election. I agree with Leinwand that *Inherit the Wind* has given generations of audiences a distorted view of Bryan. It is certainly not the only play or film to distort history to make a point.

Finally, Leinwand’s sources are, in many cases, out of date. Kazin’s book came out shortly before Leinwand’s and so was presumably unavailable, but the author’s sources on Bryan reflect the state of scholarship in the middle of the twentieth century, not the beginning of the twenty-first. Leinwand even quotes Merle Curti several times from a book written by Curti in 1915 (pp. 101, 106). I have nothing against older works simply because of their age. As a specialist in Woodrow Wilson, I still use Arthur Link extensively, but is Thomas Bailey’s 1937 article on the 1900 election really the last word on imperialism as an election issue that year (p. 96, n. 20)? Leinwand’s most recent source on Bryan, at least in his suggested readings, is a 1998 unpublished dissertation. Has there been no additional scholarship on Bryan in the past 20 years, nothing new on the 1896 election, or on Progressivism, that discuss Bryan? Leinwand’s sources on Frank Baum are up to date, although they are useful only for a short end chapter on Bryan and the *Wizard of Oz*. In addition there is no bibliography per se, just an abbreviated list of suggested readings. Readers have to go through the footnotes to find what additional sources Leinwand used. My only other complaint is that the index and the suggested readings list are rather skimpy, even for so short a book.

Despite these shortcomings, *Uncertain Trumpet* is a well-written and generally thoughtful brief biography of Bryan. It breaks no new ground, but despite its dated sources it is suitable for an undergraduate class as long as it is supplemented by other material. Kazin’s work, however, will remain the standard biography for a more detailed understanding of Bryan and his long career.

Note

[1]. See Michael Kazin. *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2006), 221.

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